

TASK FORCE BAUM and the HAMMELBURG RAID

*Reliving the Incredible Adventure
of a Young Captain
Ordered to Rescue
General Patton's Son-in-Law*

by Richard Whitaker



Major Abraham Baum, at left, in April 1945, shortly after the ill-fated raid on a German prisoner-of-war camp 40 miles behind enemy lines.
Above, Baum with the author in October 1995.

Several years ago, I read with great enthusiasm *RAID*, a book by Richard Baron, Abraham Baum, and Richard Goldhurst. It is a true story about a WWII U.S. Army raid 40-plus miles behind German lines, covering the distance from Aschaffenburg to Hammelburg. This raid was conceived and ordered by GEN George S. Patton Jr., then commanding the U.S. 3rd Army.

Although the reason for this raid was concealed from the task force and its commander until H-hour, it was an attempt to liberate some 1,200 U.S. Army POWs, one of whom was LTC John Waters, General Patton's son-in-law.

When the raid failed, speculation about LTC Waters' relationship to the army commander entered into criticisms that the operation was ill-timed, poorly planned, undermanned, and doomed to failure from the beginning.

It was not until the operation by "Task Force Baum" had begun, that CPT Abraham Baum, leading the raid, learned from MAJ Stiller, GEN Patton's aide, that LTC Waters was believed to be in the camp and that he was GEN Patton's son-in-law. At this point, CPT Baum wondered if his mission had any chance of success.

The task force included 300 men and 53 vehicles, including tanks, tank destroyers, and halftracks.

I thought that it would be good to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this famous 4th Armored Division raid,

and proceeded to call the authors and some of the key participants regarding a 50th reunion in Hammelburg, Germany. In a later telephone call, MAJ Abe Baum, the leader of the raid, was delighted to hear that he had not been forgotten and wished he had been notified earlier so he could have planned to attend. There were no funds provided by the military for this purpose.

MAJ Baum sent me a list of 29 officers and men who received the Silver Star for this action, and I would guess that there were five times as many Bronze Stars awarded, in addition to probably 150-200 Purple Hearts to those wounded and killed in action. Baum got three.

Baum also was personally awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by GEN Patton himself. His certification reads: "For the brilliant leadership he displayed while in command of Task Force Baum. The mission of this task force had led them far behind enemy lines with only a small force. The daring of this movement threw the enemy into a panic, believing that all this territory was being overrun by our troops. Communications were disrupted and large enemy forces were needlessly shifted from more important strong-points, facilitating a later drive by another combat command of this division through Hanau and to Hernfeld."

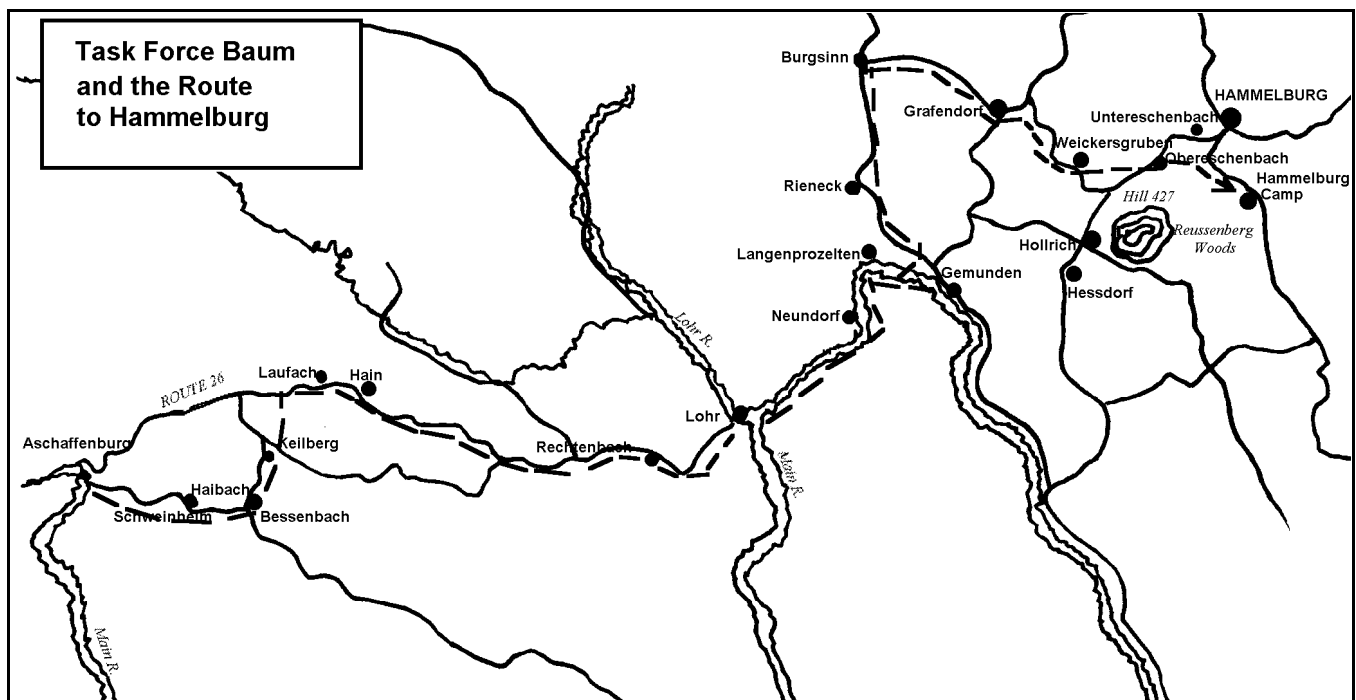
I spoke with the book's co-author, MAJ Richard Baron, via telephone, and he informed me that as far as he knew there would be no reunion, as it

was too late to plan one. It seemed ironic since the original mission was planned in less than 24 hours! Baron was awarded the Bronze Star for his efforts during the escape.

T/SGT Charles O. Graham, who led the antitank platoon, also did not wish to participate, even if there was a reunion. He was awarded five Silver Stars and two Bronze Stars during his Army career. LT Nutto, who commanded a platoon of tanks, also elected not to participate.

By March 26, 1945, units of Patton's 3rd Army, in particular the 4th Armored Division, arrived near Schweinheim after four days of hard fighting inside Nazi Germany. They paused in the hills overlooking the German-held towns of Aschaffenberg and Schweinheim. This was to be the opening scene of Patton's biggest military blunder.

Patton ordered the raid after having been ordered to the north by GEN Omar Bradley. He knew that his son-in-law, LTC John Waters, was being held approximately 70 kilometers to the east, in Oflag XIII B, a prisoner of war camp for officers overlooking the old Frankish town of Hammelburg. LTC Waters had been captured by elements of GEN Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps during the battle for the Kasserine Pass two years earlier. Military intelligence had been tracking his internment and had informed Patton that he was in the Hammelburg lager, a few miles east of Frankfurt.



This proved to be too tempting for GEN Patton, and he immediately issued verbal orders for the now-infamous raid, despite the fact that he had been ordered to turn 3rd Army north and vacate his former positions to GEN Patch, whose 7th Army was to the south, on Patton's right. GEN Patton claims he received verbal permission from GEN Omar Bradley prior to ordering the mission, but in Bradley's book, *A Soldier's Story*, he does not remember it that way.

The raid took place in spite of immediate protests by two of Patton's subordinates, MG William M. Hoge, commanding 4th Armored Division, and General Manton Eddy, both of whom thought this mission was ill-timed, poorly conceived, and undermined — ill-timed in that it came following several days of hard fighting by the same group of men who had just been given the orders to liberate the camp. These men had crossed the Rhine River on March 24th, and had just arrived at the Main River on the 26th after continuous fighting and going without sleep for days.

The men selected for the mission were from units of the famed 4th Armored Division, Patton's favorite, one of only two divisions in Europe in WWII to have been awarded a Presidential Unit Citation by President Franklin Roosevelt. The man selected to plan and choose the units sent on the raid was LTC Creighton Abrams, then thirty years old and in command of Combat Command B. LTC Abrams se-

lected his old friend, LTC Harold Cohen, a battle-hardened veteran commanding the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, to lead the raid, and ordered him to hand-pick his own men. However, Cohen was to be medically excused from the mission.

(Apparently, LTC Cohen had a severe case of hemorrhoids. He was removed from the assignment by GEN Patton himself who, after personally inspecting the inflamed area, remarked, "That is some sorry ass!"¹)

Cohen then immediately selected his own replacement with Abrams' approval.

He was 24-year-old CPT Abraham "Abe" Baum. At this point, Patton motioned for the young captain to step aside and stated to him, "Listen, Abe, you pull this off and I'll see to it that you get the Congressional Medal of Honor!"¹ CPT Baum was a tough, scrappy, hands-on officer from New York City with questionable qualifications to be heading a raid this far behind enemy lines. For one thing, he was Jewish, and capture meant uncertainty when the letter 'H,' signifying Hebrew, was discovered on a soldier's dogtags. He had been a patternmaker by trade and, because of this, had been assigned to the Army engineers upon his enlistment. Army enlistment personnel apparently did not know he was a patternmaker of clothing; he was assigned to the engineers because they thought he was a metal patternmaker. This stroke of luck eventually got him

assigned to the Army's Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia.

CPT Baum was far from being underqualified, however. At this point in the war, he had been one of the first to arrive at Bastogne. Baum had earned two Bronze and two Silver Stars.

The units assigned to accompany him on the mission were C Company of the 37th Tank Battalion, commanded by 2LT William J. Nutto, consisting of 10 Sherman tanks, and a platoon of five light tanks from D Company, commanded by 2LT William Weaver. There was also a platoon of three self-propelled assault guns, under the command of T/SGT Charles O. Graham. These were Shermans adapted to carry a 105-mm gun that could be used as an antitank weapon or as an artillery piece. The balance of "Task Force Baum, as it later became known, consisted of 27 halftracks carrying Company A of the 10th Armored Infantry, under the command of CPT Robert Lange, together with a recon platoon of nine men and three jeeps, and medical and maintenance personnel with an interpreter, PFC Irving Solotoff. Also assigned to the column was an additional jeep carrying MAJ Alexander Stiller, one of Patton's most trusted aides, who had served with Patton as a tanker in WWI.

Back in the hills overlooking Schweinhain, an artillery barrage ended at 2100 hours, and the platoon selected by Cohen to lead the breakout through the main street of town began moving. Af-

ter proceeding only 200 yards, they came under fire, and a Panzerfaust (bazooka) stopped the lead Sherman in its tracks and blocked the street. CPL Lester Powell drove his jeep forward, entered the burning tank, and drove it out of the way, also rescuing the surviving tankers. During this action, he was hit by enemy fire, and when he awakened in a hospital in England, he was told he had been awarded the Silver Star for his bravery and a Purple Heart for his wounds.

At 2300, the situation grew worse. Another tank was hit and abandoned, causing further delay. At this point MAJ Stiller joined CPT Baum and said, "We're late."

Baum replied, "I might not be able to reach Hammelburg before dawn... We need the cover of darkness."

"Is there another way to Hammelburg?" Stiller asked. Baum shook his head no, and stared at the major, still wondering why he was included in the mission.¹ Abrams and Cohen had been told the reason, but they had not passed it on to Baum. Both had thought the mission very risky and foolish.

The assignment of MAJ Stiller had caused CPT Baum to question who was actually in command, and to wonder what the aide to a famous general was doing on a combat mission about to proceed over 40 miles behind enemy lines. The answer to Baum's question caused him to turn cold. "It's important to General Patton," said Stiller, who explained that LTC Waters was in the camp.

"Who's Colonel Waters?" asked Baum.

"He's Patton's son-in-law. Didn't you know that?"

After hearing this, and knowing that 300 men were about to risk their lives for one man, he considered pulling the plug and aborting the mission. However, after collecting himself, Baum hoped that the rest of the men would see it as he did, a job to be done. At this point, he ordered his men to proceed through the town of Schweinheim without pausing. Thus began one of the most daring sagas in U.S. military history.

After clearing the town, the column stretched out over a mile. Baum's next task was to find the main east-west highway, Route 26. After passing through the small villages of Haibach-



LTC John K. Waters, seen at left in 1961 as a LTG, was in the Hammelburg prisoner-of-war camp in March 1945. Captured at Kasserine Pass in North Africa two years earlier, he was the son-in-law of General George S. Patton, Jr., then commanding the U.S. 3rd Army. Patton's troops were approaching within 40 miles of the camp when Patton ordered CPT Abraham Baum to lead a raid on the camp.

Grünmorsbach, they soon passed through Bessenbach, and then Keilberg. After reviewing the order of march as the column passed by, Baum then sped ahead, and after several turns on the narrow, winding road out of Keilberg, came to his first objective, the main road to Hammelburg.

It was now 0230 hours. Now on Route 26, Baum had just accomplished a very difficult leadership test. Leading an armored column in daylight is difficult enough; leading one at night in unfamiliar territory, over a complicated route, is even more challenging. As they proceeded to their next objective, the town of Laufach, Baum ordered the tanks to run over several telephone poles along the highway. He also ordered some lines cut by hand for added protection. Then one of his men noticed that, in several of the towns along the route, white sheets were hanging from the windows as a sign that they had surrendered. At this point, the task force leaders realized that the lines had not been cut soon enough.

As they sped on in the early dawn hours outside of Laufach, the road passed by a military parade ground. A large contingent of German troops were taking morning exercise. After spraying these troops with a hail of machine gun fire, it again became apparent that the mission was no longer a secret and worse yet, their exact position was now known to the enemy survivors. They next came upon a detachment of troops marching along the road who immediately surrendered to the lead tank unit, headed by LT Weaver. They were ordered to throw down their

weapons so that the tanks could drive over them, rendering them useless. This scene was repeated again a short distance further along and the Germans were told to march toward the approaching American Army in the west.

Baum's task force raced through Hain and Rechtenbach, then approached Lohr, the largest town since leaving Schweinheim, and also the mid-way point on the route. Baum decided to move Nutto's Shermans, with their 75mm guns, to the front of the column in case the city had been warned and fortified. This proved a prescient decision. As the column approached the outskirts in the early morning light, they spotted an overturned heavy truck with telephone poles piled around it, blocking the main road ahead. At this roadblock, another Panzerfaust struck the lead tank and disabled it, but the crew escaped and scrambled to the rear. A second Sherman then used its main gun and machine guns against the roadblock, scattering the soldiers manning it. The Shermans proceeded into the roadblock, clearing a path for the task force and scattering the defenders after bulldozing the truck aside. After continuing a short distance and scanning the town with his binoculars, Baum decided to try to bypass the city, thus avoiding further resistance. After doing this, he ran head-on into a truck convoy coming from the opposite direction and hauling 88mm antiaircraft guns. With LT Weaver back on point, he ordered his crew to "let them have it!" As Weaver swept by in his tank, "Conquering Hero," he was shocked to see that the 88s were manned by young

girls. They had been trained for this duty because all the available men were at the various fronts.¹

On March 26th, 1995, as I approach the town of Lohr down the scenic road which slopes rather steeply into this "Hansel and Gretel" town, I can envision the roadblock and am surprised to find yet another roadblock of a different sort. It is a full-blown street fair, and it turns out to be a nice treat as the old strasse through the village is filled with the bright colors of spring and the wonderful odor of many locally produced cheeses and smoked meats. It is here that I mail my first postcard to myself. It will bear the postmark of Lohr and a 50th Anniversary date of the day when Task Force Baum was here. The route Baum selected around the town was located just above the town, and was just visible from below. It was in Lohr that General Hans von Obstfelder, responsible for all German ground forces in the southern region, was summoned from his office by an aide who said the Americans were on the upper road. Seeing that they were bypassing Lohr and heading toward Gemünden, he immediately called for reconnaissance planes to follow the column and instructed his troops in Gemünden to prepare to dynamite a bridge to block the route.

As LT Weaver was leaving the Lohr area, he began to overtake a German train on his left. The train consisted of both freight and passenger cars. Some soldiers were waving at him! They stopped waving as the 75mm guns and machine guns of "Conquering Hero" began to point toward them. At this moment, the doors to the boxcars slid back to reveal small antiaircraft guns aimed at the tanks. Luck again was on the American side as the road dropped suddenly below the railroad bed. The tanks were now able to fire on the train, but the reverse was not possible. The fire from the task force struck a freight car loaded with ammunition, which blew up, and after firing additional rounds into the engine, two engineers jumped out, leaving the damaged train to its own demise.

A short while later, a train approaching from Gemünden appeared to have a chance to cross the tracks in front of the column and block the task force, but another Sherman fired two 75mm rounds into the engine and derailed the train just short of the crossing.

As Weaver and the column neared Gemünden, another juicy target appeared. This time it was a tugboat hauling five barges through the locks on the river Main. After firing high explosive and incendiary rounds into them, the barges exploded. Continuing further, another vital target appeared alongside the road, the huge railroad marshalling yards on the outskirts of Gemünden. Baum ordered all of his tanks to fire on this bonus target. They destroyed two more trains, unknowingly disrupting the unloading of the German 7th Division, who were trying to get to the front. In addition, they destroyed several more locomotives and then followed up by ordering a nearby

American spotter plane to call in an air strike on this valuable target.

Approaching Gemünden, Baum again halted to survey the bridge across the river and into town. He sent the recon platoon down the hill to verify that the bridge was intact. As LT Hofner approached the old bridge, he spotted a



Above right, the Roman bridge at Gemünden, and the castle where the Germans had sited their 75mm antitank guns.

LT Nutto, who commanded Baum's medium tanks.



pile of dozens of land mines which the Germans had just started to bury in the road. After throwing out smoke grenades, Hofner and his men began tossing the stacked mines off the road and began firing across the bridge into targets in the town. For this effort, Hofner earned a Silver Star.

As soon as the road was cleared, Baum put Nutto's medium tanks in the lead, and they started across with LT Hofner's platoon of infantry. From his turret, Nutto heard the fire from the first Panzerfaust, then another and another. There was also 75mm antitank fire coming from an old castle over the river and above the town. At this point, the lead tank was hit and rolled to a stop just five yards from the bridge, blocking the column. Nutto watched as the stunned platoon leader, LT Raymond Keil, helped his badly burned crew out of the tank. At this point, panic ensued and the lead tank's sergeant broke and ran for the rear, yelling, "I've had it, I've had it!"

At this point, Baum ran up as Nutto heard another "whoomp" from a panzerfaust. Looking up he saw it wobble and strike the asphalt in front of them before exploding and showering

them with steel fragments and searing phosphorus. He also felt the fragments pierce his body, and then watched as Baum went down. Baum struggled to stand up while bleeding from his right knee and hand. As the two men moved back to receive first aid, Baum watched as Elmer Sutton, leading the infantry platoon, made it across the bridge with two more men running after him. Suddenly, the Germans blew the bridge and the two men vanished forever.

It is March 26th, 1995. While standing above the roadside overlooking the bridge, which has long since been rebuilt, it is starting to rain and again I am reminded of what must have been going through the minds of the men who watched as their comrades died. The bridge still has the original foundation erected by the Roman army almost 2000 years ago. The bombed-out castle also survived and is still standing in the mist above the city.

The town is strangely quiet, with no one in sight on this lazy Sunday afternoon. Then a policeman drives up to see why we are stopped here. Reality returns, and we press on along Baum's path.

On March 27th, 1945, at 1100 hours, Baum is also backing out of the town. He has sent a recon probe to look for another road out of the village. After Baum consulted his map, Stiller asked him if he wanted to go back.

"We don't quit," Baum said, adding that the enemy had no idea of where his unit was heading.

After turning north on a back road, Baum sent his second message back to 10th Armored: "Two tanks lost, two officers and eighteen men wounded or killed. Proceeding."¹

A short while later, at a fork in the road, another tank was lost after throwing a track. At this point, the wounded were lifted out of the halftracks and placed on the side of the road, where they would be found and given medical aid. They were in no condition to continue.

The unit had moved ahead only a short distance when a lost American jeep from the 7th Division, carrying a combat propaganda team with a loudspeaker, wandered across Baum's path. The team had seen the smoke from the battle in Gemünden and, upon discov-



The narrow city gate of Burgsinn, the only route through the town, remains much like Baum's task force found it in 1945.

ering the tank tracks leading out of the city, proceeded to catch up with the column, thinking it to be one of their own. They then began broadcasting in German, directing the message into the woods towards some enemy soldiers who had outrun the column from Gemünden. The broadcast message was simple: it would be better to surrender to the 7th U.S. Army than to the Russians, who were coming from the east. About 100 of them walked out of the woods and began laying down their weapons. Then one of Baum's men informed the team that the task force was not part of 7th Army. The propaganda team immediately left to find their own troops.

With Baum leaving in the opposite direction, the abandoned Germans must have thought the American rules for fighting a war a bit odd.

Moving to the north, the column captured a lone paratrooper who was absent without leave from his unit and heading for home. After finding out that he was originally from Hammelburg, Baum and the interpreter, Private Solotoff, convinced him to lead them to a bridge in Burgsinn. The paratrooper proved to be a valuable asset. Several times along the route he convinced other smaller groups of German soldiers to surrender and walk towards the oncoming U.S. Army. The last group to follow his instructions were manning two camouflaged antitank guns. Further along the road to

Burgsinn, the task force chanced upon a staff car containing a high-ranking German general, Oriel Lotz. After forcing him to mount the front of one of the lead tanks to quell possible hostile fire, they proceeded through Reineck and then across the narrow but intact Burgsinn bridge.

The town of Burgsinn is an older walled city and, had they been forewarned of Baum's arrival, they could have easily blocked the main gate into town, forcing another costly delay. Even after passing through the main gate, the streets are so narrow that any stalled vehicle would have created additional problems and further delay. Upon leaving Burgsinn, there is a rather steep incline to negotiate on the road to Gräfen Dorf. Somewhere in the wooded region between the two villages, another unexpected event occurred. The task force encountered several hundred conscripted Russians who were working on the construction of an autobahn bridge, guarded by a group of German soldiers. Again, the captured paratrooper ordered them to throw down their arms. Upon seeing this, the Russians mobbed Baum's jeep, shouting, "Amerikanski, Amerikanski." The Russians wanted to do something further to help their liberators, and having armed themselves with the German rifles, they wanted to take the town. Baum approved of this, but on one condition — they were to wait until after the task force had passed through. In addition, the Russians wanted the general. Baum again complied.¹

On March 27th, 1995, driving out of the woods, which were spectacular to see, the road again turns steeply downhill and offers a splendid view of the town of Gräfen Dorf. As the main street wound through the town, I was amazed to see how narrow the roadway was, and how easily it could have been blocked. About halfway through the village, we spotted a cafe and stopped for coffee and cake. Since the owner of the cafe was in his late fifties, I asked him if he remembered the panzer raid of Task Force Baum. He became excited, and immediately produced his copy of the *RAID*, the book by Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst. He told me that he was a small boy, hiding in the basement below where we were standing, when the American tanks came rumbling through. He watched them from the basement window, and it was a sight he will never forget. Another man

who had been sitting nearby got up to tell me that he had also been a young man in the town of Burgsinn when the column passed by, and he recalled similar memories. After saying good-bye and thanking them for their time, I then asked them if they would send me a postcard from their towns with a short story of what they had seen, and they both have complied. (I sent them each a 4th Armored shoulder patch and a thank you card.)

Outside, as we were getting into our car, the cafe owner pointed to some second floor windows above the shop next door, and explained that his neigh-



bors had draped a white sheet over the window sill in order to keep the Americans from firing on them. This worked fine until some SS troops came through the village later and, upon seeing the white sheets of surrender, proceeded to shoot the townspeople who had hung them up! This proved to be a very sobering experience, and at this point I wished I had not eaten such a large piece of cake.

After we crossed yet another tiny bridge in the middle of town, the valley narrowed as the road followed the railroad and the river up out of town toward Weickersgrüben. This was the site of another crucial incident for Task Force Baum.

As the task force left Gräfen-dorf, a single-engine German spotter aircraft flew up the valley behind them. After the column had fired several hundred rounds at the aircraft, unsuccessfully, the pilot managed to fly out of range,

tipping his wings in defiance. As it turned out, the small plane had positively identified and counted the remaining vehicles — 13 tanks, three assault guns, and 27 halftracks. Meanwhile and unknown to Baum, General Lotz had gotten free of the Russians and phoned Gräfen-dorf, passing on the information that the Americans had talked about nothing but Hammelburg. Among those forewarned of the column's destination was the camp commandant at Oflag XIIIB, General Von Goeckel, and other commanders in the area, including Oberst (Colonel) Cord Van Hoepple, area commander, and General Bernhard Weisenberger at



At left, the bridge at the village of Gräfen-dorf, where SS men shot civilians who displayed white flags. Above, the author with Frau Stürzenberger, widow of Karl, and their son Edgar.

Schweinfurt, positioned just east of Hammelburg.

At 1200 hours on March 27th, the column had just passed through Michelau and then over another small bridge across the Saale River and north of Weickersgrüben, their next destination. At this point, the guide, who was unfamiliar with this region, became useless, and after turning the column up a dead-end road, needed to be replaced. Baum's next move was to send his driver, with Solotoff the translator, back to Weickersgrüben with instructions to find somebody who could get them to Hammelburg. After speeding back into the town, they arrived at an inn.

Solotoff found the owner, Karl Stürzenberger. After telling Solotoff that his wife was due to give birth this very night and he was the only one to help her, he asked to be excused from acting as a guide. This request fell on deaf

ears. The situation was now desperate and the task force was stalled and way behind schedule.

After leading the column back up the correct road to Highway 27, and after arriving at the intersection to Hammelburg, the innkeeper again asked to be excused to return to his wife, and this time he was allowed to go home. After seeing the entire column pass by, he realized the consequences he faced if the SS found out about his involvement with the Americans. So, after returning and aiding in the birth of a new son, he went into the woods, where he remained until the end of the war.

It was raining again as we passed by a covered bus stop in Weickersgrüben, where my friend John Dirks noticed three men standing and smoking, seeking shelter from the rain. We wondered if they knew of the raid and Herr Stürzenberger? The answer was an excited yes! One of the men was among the Russians freed by CPT Baum and his men. He had elected to remain in the area after the war. He said we were only 50 meters from the home of Herr Stürzenberger. A few minutes later, ringing the innkeeper's doorbell, I felt much the same anticipation as Solotoff must have felt. A member of the family answered; not Karl, but his grandson, who invited us in to meet the family — Karl's sons, Herbert and Edgar. After explaining the reason for my previously unannounced visit, (Abe Baum had told me to look up his friend Karl when I passed through), we were immediately escorted into the family room where we were given a glass of local wine and treated like royalty.

It was at this point that we learned of Karl's passing. We were saddened, but also delighted to meet Klara, his widow and the mother of Herbert, Edgar, and Walter, the son who was born on this day 50 years earlier. Karl had died in 1991. The family told me that Walter would be coming later if we wanted to stay and meet him, but our schedule depended on available light for additional photographs, so we thanked them for their hospitality and, after presenting them with 4th Armored patches, moved on towards Hammelburg.

Task Force Baum is now in the hills overlooking Hammelburg and at the intersection of a road that led south over the Reussenberg hills and toward the lager. It was not far from this point that

Hauptmann Richard Koehl, leading a company of eight panzerjaegers (tank hunters), had positioned himself. He had been alerted by one of the phone calls that General Lotz had placed after escaping from the Russians. He set up his guns near the railroad station, about 1,000 yards from the road that CPT Baum would have to pass on his way into the camp. He seemed to be in an ideal location for an ambush, but the task force was traveling at high speed when it reached this point, and all the rounds fired by Koehl's 75mm guns missed their targets.

Baum sent T/SGT Graham's assault guns 500 yards up the hill to fire on Koehl and protect the rear of the column. Unfortunately, this section of the road turned up rather steeply toward a saddle at the top on the ridge, and before all of the column had passed by, they took casualties from Koehl's anti-tank guns. Slowed by the incline, two more tanks were knocked out and the halftrack carrying CPT Lange was hit. He was seriously wounded. Three of his men placed him on another vehicle and headed up over the ridge to safety.

While Koehl was firing on the column, Baum was racing up and down the road in his jeep, trying to get stalled vehicles off the road and trying to restore order. Now Graham's guns were in position on the ridge and started to return fire. Capable of firing 8-10 rounds per minute, Graham's guns scored three knockouts on Koehl's panzerjaegers and also wiped out a fuel and ammunition column of six trucks moving toward Koehl. Unfortunately, Baum's unit had been shot up badly, losing two mediums and one light tank, five halftracks, and two jeeps. Now out of range and over the hill's crest, the task force regrouped at the sight of a large French memorial cross, erected by the French government after WWI to commemorate the French soldiers who had perished in Hammelburg. Baum now had his first view of Oflag XIII-B. It lay on the reverse slope about 1,700 yards away.

As remaining light was growing short, Baum left Graham's assault guns and a rifle platoon behind to protect the rear and to provide covering fire from above and into the German positions outside the camp. He arranged the remaining 11 tanks into a "desert formation" (spread out side by side), with the



infantry following close behind. With the final goal in sight, they headed downhill towards the camp. When they were about 200 yards from the wire fence, the Germans began firing.

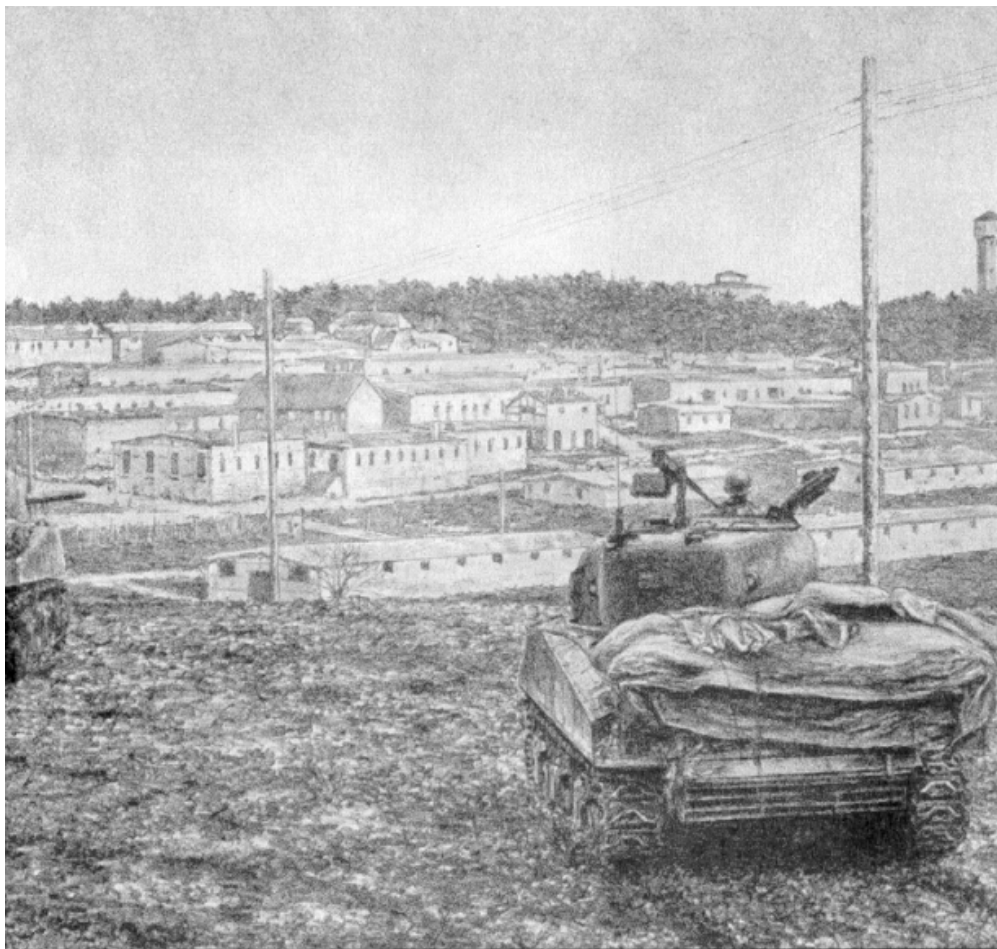
We were met at the Schloss Hotel Saalach by Herr Oberstleutnant (LTC) Taube of the Hammelburg Infantry Training School, and drove to his office. The Infantry Training School was celebrating its 100th year in Hammelburg. In Colonel Taube's office, we had coffee and were introduced to LTC Bradford, the U.S. Army liaison officer assigned to the school; Hans Schnebel, the school's librarian and historian; and Peter Martin, a history instructor, who acted as our translator and guide. A short time later, we found ourselves at the saddle, standing in the road next to the French cross monument where we had our first view into the compound from the point at which CPT Baum and his men first saw it.

Standing at the location of Graham's support position near the cross, we looked back down the panzerstrasse

(tank road) and saw an overview of the steep winding route the task force took coming up from the base of the mountain.

We returned to our van and proceeded to the first camp buildings that Baum's men approached. They are still in use as Infantry School support and supply buildings. During the time of the raid, these buildings were administrative buildings, located just inside the compound fence.

Baum's unit responded to the enemy fire which commenced about 200 yards out from the wire fence. Then the tanks broke through the wire. General Von Goeckel, the officer in charge, surrendered his entire command to a surprised POW, Colonel Paul R. Goode. During the initial melee, LTC Waters, the primary objective of the raid, was severely wounded by a German soldier, carried back into the compound, and hidden by a Serbian medical officer. He later learned that the bullet had missed his lower spine by a fraction of an inch. During all the confusion that



began with the American entrance into the compound, MAJ Stiller had been running from building to building, searching for LTC Waters. When he found him, he was already in the operating room, fighting for his life, and in no shape to travel. After speaking with him, and verifying his condition, he left in search of Baum.

The camp was in pandemonium, with prisoners running around everywhere. They were jumping on all the vehicles and some were kissing Baum's men. Others were asking for cigarettes, still not realizing that they were over 40 miles from the American front lines!

Meanwhile, Baum was making a few discoveries of his own. First, there were far more men here than he had planned on rescuing, and he was now severely short of transport vehicles. Even if his original column had survived the 16 hours of fighting and travel it had taken to get there, they would have still been far short of transportation vehicles. There were more than 1,500 prisoners, and he would

only be able to accommodate and rescue 200 or less. Far worse was the fact that no one seemed to be in charge of this unruly bunch! It was like Times Square on New Year's Eve, Baum recalled later.

LT Richard Baron, one of the prisoners and a co-author of *RAID*, came out of the compound and realized that Baum had only a small task force. Since it was not supported by any additional American forces, they would have to fight their way out and back to the west. Baron had been captured in Alsace-Lorraine while fighting with his machine gun platoon, a part of the 45th Division. While he realized the dilemma the task force faced, he decided that leaving was still a better option than remaining at Hammelburg.

At about that time, Baum and Goode found each other and were discussing whose duty it was to inform the men that only 200 or so would be able to go out with the column. Baum mounted the hood of one of the vehicles and began to shout for quiet. This was as dif-

ficult a task as he had faced up to this point, and it was only with extreme difficulty that he was able to explain to the excited crowd that only a few hundred of them could leave with him. At this point, many of the stunned and confused men stood paralyzed in front of him. Slowly they began to move in two directions, most back into the camp from which they had just come, and several hundred onto the tanks and into the halftracks. Among these was LT Baron, who was one of the men searching for a spot on one of the tanks.

As it was now dark, Baum thought perhaps this would provide cover for his exit from the compound. He sent LT Nutto out with three tanks and three halftracks to probe the roads for an escape route. After Nutto left, Baum reorganized the remaining task force with five light tanks in the front, then five halftracks, and the assault guns with the recon jeep and the remaining halftracks in the rear. This was accomplished just prior to moving to another assembly area to await the results of Nutto's probes.

Upon finishing the latest order of battle and just prior to moving out, disaster struck again. An explosion occurred in the last tank in the column and blew it up. The tank had been struck by a panzerfaust fired by an infiltrating German combat engineer who had gotten close under cover of darkness.

In the time it took for Baum to reach the new assembly area, the Germans were also moving quickly. The officers and senior enlisted men quickly dispatched soldiers and cadets to the various exit roads. They immediately sent men to the south, to the small villages of "Hundsfield" and "Bonnland." These small villages had been appropriated by the German government to be used in house-to-house infantry training. The villages had been vacant of civilians since 1895, but to Nutto they looked just like any other sleeping German village. After passing "Hundsfield," the first small village on his right on the route south, he soon spotted a roadblock of felled trees across the road, difficult to bypass in the darkness. Shortly after Baum arrived to survey the situation, he ordered Nutto back to the intersection in "Hundsfield" and then out toward the



The old cobblestone road that Baum's task force took, looking back toward Hammelburg.

Reussenberg Woods, which were above the small valley they were in.

By now, the Germans were reacting. They had spotted Nutto's change in direction, and a team of combat engineers was sent ahead, to the area known as Hill 340, near the Reussenberg, to intercept them. As soon as these engineers began firing on Nutto's unit, Baum heard them and raced to the trouble spot in his jeep. It was another roadblock with supporting fire coming from the woods above. This forced yet another change in direction for the probe, this time to the west toward the main road at "Hollrich."

This route passed Hill 427 on their right flank and continued about four miles into town. After passing through the town and with the main highway in sight, Nutto radioed Baum with the news. He was elated, replying, "We are moving up... We should be there in twenty minutes."¹

LT Baron, who was riding on one of the probe tanks, recalls what happened next. With Nutto back in his tank and on the main road just out of town, two panzerfausts lit up the night, revealing German tanks, in addition to infantry!

One of the German rounds slammed into Nutto's tank and knocked him semiconscious. Then the second tank was also hit. After waking up, Nutto found himself on the road and a prisoner of war.

The remaining halftracks and the surviving tanks made their way back toward the task force. This was a serious blow to Baum, as he had just lost the irreplaceable Nutto and two more much-needed tanks.

At 0030 hours, Baum's jeep approached the town, where he ran into

the survivors coming back. He immediately sent two tanks about a mile to probe the next town of "Hessdorf," which was also situated along the main road, Highway 27. At this point, he ordered the remaining former POWs off and told them to wait with the halftracks. In addition, he ordered the main column to continue on the route he had just traveled and to wait for further instructions at a road crossing about midway between him and the latest probe. Some of the POWs had considered returning to the safety of the lager and were discussing this option among themselves.

At 0230 hours, as Baum and the two probe tanks were approaching the town of Hessdorf, he glanced at the odometer in his jeep. It revealed that with all of the diversions, he had already traveled 52 miles since leaving Schweinheim, and had been without sleep for over 100 hours. Then, suddenly, from out of the darkness, a panzerfaust took out another of his tanks. The surviving men scrambled up on the remaining tank and headed for the intersection below the Reussenberg Woods.

After joining up with the main body once more, Baum decided to retire until daylight when they would be able to force their way out across country and around any roadblocks. It would be futile to attempt any more this night; the losses had already been too high. He then ordered his men up to Hill 427 and onto a semi-flat area adjacent to the woods. Using the woods as cover to the rear, he fanned the assault guns and the remaining tanks out toward the valley below and toward the lager. Next, he ordered the men to refuel prior to dawn and prepare to destroy the remaining empty and damaged vehicles.

While his men were following Baum's latest orders, he summoned Moses, Graham, Weaver, and Stiller to a final pre-breakout conference and was informed by Stiller that more of the POWs wanted to return to the lager. About this time, a group gathered around Colonel Goode as he stood on one of the tanks. In short order, he explained that, due to the additional vehicle losses, there were still too many of them and they would be a burden to the remaining task force trying to break out and fight their way back to the U.S. lines. After this sober news, about 70 of them elected to return with Colonel Goode and left at 0500 hours. This left only a dozen of the original POWs, including Richard Baron and a few of the officers of the 45th that Baum then assigned to replace the vacant slots among his own remaining infantry.

Colonel Bradford unlocks the gate at the intersection where Baum lead the task force up the road to Hill 427. The gate is locked because this is a live firing day and an artillery training exercise is scheduled to begin in an hour. I am feeling a bit uneasy now, as I have been in this kind of situation early in my Marine Corps training at Camp Pendleton and have heard of the accidents that can occur due to short or long rounds. It is also raining, and a cold winter wind is blowing up the hillside towards the Reussenberg Woods. We saw the exact spot where the task force was deployed and the approximate position of the panzerjagers waiting hidden about 1,500 yards down the hillside. About 100 yards away, there was a burned-out personnel carrier and additional target vehicles for the artillery training school.

The panorama of the battlefield from the plateau is breathtaking. The scene is also quite sobering, and I feel a sudden sense of awareness toward the men of Task Force Baum.

It is almost as if I have stepped back in time 50 years and the drama is about to reach its final climax.

At 0500 hours on March 28th, 1945, the column of men returning to the lager is barely half a mile from the task force when they hear a familiar sound. It is the sound of tanks and men digging in and preparing for battle. Unfortunately, the sounds are not coming from the task force, but from Koehl's panzerjager platoon! After waiting 10

hours for fuel and ammunition, they are now maneuvering into position, waiting for daylight. Ironically, none of Colonel Goode's men returning to the safety of the lager thought to send a runner back to warn CPT Baum of their discovery. Could they have all been so dispirited and exhausted from the last 12 hours of emotional ups and downs that they overlooked this critical point? In the meantime, even more activity was occurring in the German ranks. A team of 20 officers and cadets were quietly positioning themselves in the woods just above the plateau and to the rear of where Baum's men were making final preparations for the breakout. These men had followed the task force during the confusion and were armed with panzerfausts. Just prior to daybreak, they were in the Reussenberg Woods and were wide awake with anticipation of the coming dawn. In the task force, however, some of the men had finally fallen asleep after days of having none. Their sleep would be short-lived.

The seriously wounded men who were still with Baum, and who were in no condition to endure the journey back to the front lines, were taken on stretchers to a nearby barn and made as comfortable as possible with extra blankets. A large cloth red cross was then fashioned on the roof, visible in daylight. Baum gave the order to mount up at about 0800 hours.

In the German headquarters, Oberst Hoepple's aide awakened him at 0730 hours and told him that the American tanks were visible on the hillside just above Koehl's position and below the Reussenberg Woods. At this point, Hoepple radioed coordinated instructions to the various units surrounding the task force. No one was to fire until Koehl's antitank guns opened up, and then everyone was to fire at will!

At 0810 hours, CPT Baum was still issuing the final commands to his men before the breakout. His radioman was transmitting a situation report to the American lines and advising them they might require air support later. As the tanks roared to life and began moving towards their preassigned positions, and with many of the men still on foot and hurrying to mount vehicles, it happened! "A sheet of Hell engulfed the clearing... The ground shook with concussion after concussion... Geysers of dirt and steel were thrown up... Trees



The Hammelburg camp's hospital, where Waters, and later Baum, were treated after the failure of the raid and capture of members of Baum's force.

were falling over, and branches were flying through the air and floating to the earth... To Baum it seemed as though a single enemy salvo had utterly destroyed his task force... Tanks were ablaze... Halftracks stopped suddenly... and men were spilled out over the ground. From his jeep and using his field glasses, he saw Koehl's five antitank guns moving up the hillside toward him and firing faster than he had ever seen them fire before. They were, he thought, firing like semi-automatic rifles... Scanning across the slope in another direction, he saw five tanks firing their main guns as well as their machine guns. All of the units were supported by infantry, also firing and moving up rapidly. The fire was so intense that Baum never had a chance to deal with the panzerfaust fire coming from his rear. The one bright spot occurred when he saw many of his tankers returning fire... The attack was so overwhelming... and unremitting... and uncommonly accurate.¹

Within three minutes of Baum's order to move, "the entire clearing seemed to be one single sheet of flame, every vehicle was hit... It was then he knew he had lost his task force."¹

Sidles was still on the radio, tapping out the final message from Task Force Baum in Morse code: "Task Force Baum surrounded. Under heavy fire. Request air support." Sadly, several rounds struck the barn sheltering the wounded and the stone walls supporting it collapsed in on the men. It was doubtful that any had survived.

"Every man for himself," Baum shouted as he leapt from his jeep and headed into the woods. He soon found cover with Sidles and Stiller. He

guessed that fewer than a hundred men had made it to the woods. The last order shouted to his men was, "Fan out...make your way west in groups of twos and threes, and go your own way so you won't be visible. Get as much distance between you and them before they get here. Get going!"¹

With these last hurried orders, Task Force Baum had effectively disintegrated. It was a great effort, and not without many successes. Although the primary mission failed, the havoc created this far behind enemy lines had occupied the Germans for the better part of two days as they ran around in circles trying to figure out what was going on. Meanwhile, the U.S. Army's 3rd and 7th Armies were making rapid progress.

In addition, there were so many acts of bravery and heroism that everyone should have gotten a medal. As it turned out, I am not sure that they did not. I know of at least fifty Silver Stars, one Distinguished Service Cross (Baum's), and more than one hundred Purple Hearts, (Baum got three), as well as Bronze Stars for everyone. (Baum got one also.)

As I walk into the dense woods behind the plateau, I envision the mayhem that had taken place here that fateful morning. Men running in all directions, trying to remain alive and also attempting to escape. T/SGT Graham was one of a few who accomplished this feat. He eventually made it back to the 7th U.S. Army sector after several days of close encounters with the enemy. CPT Baum and LT Baron were not as fortunate, however, and ended up back in the lager, thrown together by fate and still 25 years away from

telling the world in writing of this adventure.

As I take one last look around the floor of the woods for a souvenir of this moment in history, I remember that CPT Baum was still thinking clearly enough at this stage to throw his dog tags into the forest as he ran. He did this because they were imprinted with the letter 'H,' for Hebrew, and he was well aware of the many atrocity stories that had been told about Jews in Nazi captivity. As it turned out later, he was never identified nor discovered by the Germans in the lager as the leader of the mission. It was not conceivable to them that all this havoc had been created by a 24-year-old captain; they had been searching for a much higher-ranking officer. It is unclear what happened to Stiller after his capture and he is not mentioned again in any of the manuscripts at my disposal.

About one hundred yards from the edge of the woods, I began to look in earnest for the dogtags which Abe Baum discarded 50 years ago in hopes of the ultimate treasure find, but it was not to be. As I walked out of the woods, the others were waiting, and a glance at my watch told me that we had only 15 minutes until the live-firing began. Not wishing to relive Baum's encounter to the fullest, I hasten my pace. As we are driving out of the area, we are aware of German soldiers in "camo" cover with radios and, yes, Panzerfausts too! The soldiers are part of the training cadre and are waiting in foxholes for the artillery fire to begin. Again, I am reminded of the task force and how real this 50th Anniversary tour had become.

Shortly after closing and locking the gate behind us, I hear the sounds of the guns firing in the distance, but my mission has been completed.

In trying to establish a complete picture of what happened, the following comments are of note:

Patton died denying publicly any knowledge of his son-in-law being in Hammelburg when he ordered the mission. But on March 23rd, shortly before ordering the raid, Patton had written a letter to his wife Beatrice: "We are headed straight for John's place and may get there before he is moved." Patton stated in his journal, published after his death, "I can say this — that throughout the campaign in Europe, I

know of no error I made except that of failing to send a combat command to Hammelburg." Additionally, in his book, *War As I Knew It*, after realizing that the raid had failed, Patton states, "I made arrangements to reconstitute the two companies of the 4th Armored Division, which we now knew was definitely captured. After forcing a crossing over the Main east of Frankfurt, in which the captain in command was slightly wounded, they continued the attack and reached the outskirts of Hammelburg (interesting that he refers to it as an attack). Here they ran into elements of three German divisions which, as we had hoped, had been drawn by their attack. (At this point, I think the general was "stretching it" somewhat.) While some of the tanks... and armored infantry engaged these divisions, other tanks went to the prison camp, some six miles to the north, and released the prisoners. [Again, Patton does not mention Colonel Waters.] These tanks, accompanied by some 1200 prisoners, rejoined the rest of the force in the vicinity of Hammelburg and started back over the road they had taken. The following report was made by my aide, MAJ Stiller, who was with them but not in command [again no mention of Waters.] He suggested that instead of returning over the road already used, the column strike north. The officer in charge declined that advice and the column stopped to refuel. While engaged in this refueling, they were attacked by three regiments of German infantry from three different directions and scattered. When the confusion had cleared, MAJ Stiller, the captain in command of the force, and five enlisted men continued to fight until they had used up all their ammunition and had their vehicles destroyed, when they surrendered."

This is the only mention of the raid that the general saw fit to include in his only book on the war.

Because the mission was labeled Top Secret (GEN Patton's influence continued until 24 years after his death in 1946), it was 25 years before MAJ Baum and MAJ Baron told their stories in book form.

I am indebted to both of them for their help and information. Without them I could never have made this journey back in time. I also believe that, although many of the men of 4th Armored died and suffered in vain, the

story of the individual heroism and courage of these men remains as one of the great military feats of all time.

Endnotes

¹*RAID*, Baron, Baum, and Goldhurst, N.Y., Putnam and Sons, 1981.

²Personal Interview, Richard Baron, 5 Jan 95.

³Personal interview, Charles Graham, 7 Jan 95.

⁴Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 1703-5008.

⁵"The Hammelburg Affair," Martin Blumen-son, *Army*, 15 Oct 65.

⁶Personal interview, Abe Baum, February 1995.

⁷*War As I Knew It*, George S. Patton, Jr., Houghton Mifflin, 1947, pp. 280-281.

⁸*Patton's Best*, Frankel and Smith, Hawthorn, 1978, pp. 140-170.

⁹Baum, A.J., "Notes on Task Force Baum," 4th Armored Division report, 10 Apr 45.

¹⁰*The Mighty Endeavor*, Charles MacDonald, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 460-461.

¹¹*48 Hours to Hammelburg*, Charles Whiting, Ballantine Books, 1970.

¹²*The Last 100 Days*, John Toland, Random House, 1966.

¹³Telephone interview and materials sent by COL James Leach, DSC, 4th Armored Historian.

¹⁴Telephone interview and materials sent by SGT Sam Schenker, Secretary, 4th Armored Division Association.

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